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ABSTRACT

The communications approach to teaching speech to high school students views speech as the study of the communication process in order to develop an awareness of and a sensitivity to the variables that affect human interaction. In using this approach the student is encouraged to try out as many types of messages using as many techniques and mediums as the classroom allows. Classroom activities can include role-playing, creative dramatics, micro-labs, problem-solving groups, radio and television shows, mime, mock congresses, films, musical performances, and press conferences. The student is also encouraged to experiment with communication approaches outside the classroom, and to select a goal and determine the forces that operate for or against achieving his goal. Methods of evaluation for this approach should include a measure of the effects. Rating sheets, shift of opinion ballots, written feedback, and audio and video tapes may all be used for evaluation purposes. (WR)

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Speech Communication

Betty Anderson

Some of us teach speech skills through extracurricular or competitive speech programs. Some of us teach speech skills via semester or year-long courses. Many of us are probably asked to "work speech into" our English or language art classes. Though our formats may be quite diverse, our responsibilities are identical--we are to improve the oral competencies of our students.

I'd like to focus today, on what I think is a desirable approach--to teaching speech skills. It is an approach that can be incorporated into any speech program--be it one that operates separate from the language arts courses or one which is a part of the language arts units. For lack of a better, more precise term, I'll refer to this approach as the communications approach. I'd like to explain it, discuss how it might alter our class activities and then suggest the reasons why I think it is worthwhile.

In most high schools, we tend to view speech as a performing art. Whether we teach full courses or work units into other subject area classes, our aim seems to be to get our students to stand up in front of a group and present a project--oration, interp, panel, report, with some poise and polish. This performance is usually evaluated in terms of standards we define--the speech must have an introduction, the panel must be 15 minutes, you must have several examples to prove your thesis statement, you must establish good eye contact, etc. We assume that if a student can perform according to the standards we define, we have helped him. We assume that the exercises he has gone through will give him the skills he needs for the future.

The communications approach is somewhat different. Instead of stressing speech as public speaking-public performance, speech is viewed as the study of the communication process. The aim is to develop an awareness of and a sensitivity to the variables that affect human interaction. We try to help students understand that their communication involves choices and that there are few, if

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any absolutes or rules that guarantee successful communication. In short, this approach tries to help each student see that what he aims to do and what he elects to do must be determined by an analysis of the situational and psychological variables that influence and complicate his speaking efforts.

HOW DOES THIS NEW APPROACH AFFECT OUR COURSES? HOW DOES IT ALTER OUR CLASS ACTIVITIES?

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, the communication emphasis does not eliminate the need for students to perform. In fact, the basic element of the communications approach is the students performance in interaction settings. This approach does, however, entail changes in the nature of performance activities and the manner in which those assignments are evaluated. Let me describe more specifically some of the ways in which our class activities might be altered if we adopted a communications emphasis:

1) The classroom would become a place where students could experiment with a wide range of strategies and mediums. The classroom would no longer be used exclusively or primarily to simulate the public speaking setting. Rather the classroom would be used as a communications laboratory. The student would experience as many situations--dyads, small groups, formal and informal audiences as possible. The student would be encouraged to try out as many types of messages using as many techniques and mediums as the classroom allows. Role-playing, creative dramatics, micro-labs, and problem-solving groups can be an integral part of the students program. Campaign units, mock congresses, radio and television shows, press conferences, films, slide presentations, musical performances and mimes all become legitimate experiences for the classroom. Simulations such as Star Power, Redwood Forest Controversy, Black and White, Challenge, Ghetto--among others, can be used to help students see how their backgrounds and attitudes affect their ability to understand and influence others.

2) The student is encouraged to experiment with communication approaches outside the classroom. The student could, for example, select a goal--to increase his allowance, to help a kid kick drugs, to get a friend elected class president, to lose weight, etc. He might try to determine the forces that operate for or against achieving his goal. He might develop some strategies and try them out. A written post-analysis might explain which strategies worked/ which failed and why. Students might also plan assemblies, interview school or community personel, describe peer group rivalries, observe different social and task groups, attend community debates, board meetings, lectures, movies, or assemblies. Students could be encouraged to visit local businesses, industries, hospitals, airports--to study how different communication systems operate and why they may breakdown. With these kinds of assignments teachers may need to set up conferences or schedule seminars--to provide direction and to give students the tools they need to analyze particular communication situations. But, with appropriate guidance, students can develop keen observational and analytical skills. Our environment is a maze of communication experiences. The communications approach requires that the student be exposed as either observer, practitioner or listener to as many facets of this maze as practical restrictions, instructor creativity and length of term permit.

3) Methods of evaluation would be revised. When using the communications approach, the evaluation of the message must include an effects measure. How did the receivers respond? Did they respond as the source intended? Rating sheets, shift of opinion ballots, written feedback, audio and video tapes may be useful in gathering information re: just how the receivers did react. One innovation--I'm trying is simply to be sure that every speaker gets written feedback from each listener. My students are amazed at the variety of reactions and the variety of interpretation placed on what is said. They begin to see that communication is not a cut and dried procedure. They seem to gain some understanding of the complex situational nature of human communication.

4) Finally the communications approach suggests new content for our courses. Rather than developing courses or units around specific skill requirements that are based on prescriptive criterea, the focus is on identifying and describing variables that are present and which may affect communication. Instead of a unit on introductions or delivery, units may bear new titles like source credibility, attitude formation, conformity pressure, etc. The courses would not try to provide a number of specific standards that every speech must meet. Instead, the courses or units would try to provide some concepts--some means of discussing the variables that affect communication. We would try to evolve statements regarding the relationships of those variables and the probable effects of these variables under certain conditions, but we would not provide a set of commandments--a specific recipe for a good message--guides that a student may accept as absolutes, but which may not apply to many situations.

I've tried to outline a new emphasis in speech education and delineate some of the ways in which it might alter our class activities. Let me briefly explain why I think this emphasis is so worthwhile.

First, its a more complete approach. Our current programs emphasize the public speaking setting. For most students, this is a highly unique setting. The majority of the communication experiences which the student encounters outside the classroom involve him in small groups and informal settings. The communications approach broadens the base of the students classroom speech experiences.

Second, it gives the student more useful information--information that would allow him to adapt to a wide variety of communication situations. Instead of knowing 3 rules for good introductions, 5 tips for informative speeches and 4 ways to improve pronunciation--the student would have a basis for understanding

or analyzing the dynamics of any communication setting. He would have a basis for envolving his own guides for a variety of situations instead of having prescribed guides for unique situations.

Finally, our courses could be more relevant to the student experiences. Let me illustrate--When my students see 40 angry blacks ransack a library, throw chains through windows and knock sinks off the wall with steep poles--and then come to a class where they are told they don't pronounce their "t's", they have too much weight on their left foot, and points B and C on the outline should be reversed--somehow, the class does not seem important or useful.

Or, when my students wondered how Agnew (when he was in his prime) could be so influential when his reasoning was so weak--it is difficult for me to say--Well, he would be more effective if he had proved the causal links in his arguments.

The explanation of how to do a speech often seems inaccurate, contradictory, and unimportant, because the standards we apply in the classroom do not seem to explain success or failure of communication in the real world. By focusing on the communication process, we are able to discuss the barriers to communication, to discuss the human forces which affect communication--and we may do so in a way that is more realistic and therefore more relevant to the student.

I've attempted to describe what I think is a desireable new emphasis in speech education. Perhaps some of you are already incorporating the approach in your teaching. It is consistent with directions already being taken in some college speech courses. It is an approach that can be adapted to independent speech courses or to units of speech that have been tacked on to language arts courses. I've described my view--and it is just that--one opinion in an ongoing dialogue about the direction our discipline should take. It is not intended to be a universal approach acceptable to all--but it does represent my current feeling re: the role and direction <u>that speech training should be taking</u>.